

SHELLY: Mr. Nolan's going to prison? Great. Then he can't give me detention anymore. What's he going to prison for?

TONY: He strangled Perry Paulson and cut him up and put him in a garbage bag.

TINA: Who said he cut him up?

TONY: Well, he *bad* to. I mean, they do make garbage bags strong, but not *that* strong. He must have cut him up to put in several bags.

CAROLYN: I'm going to be sick.

TINA: Don't be sick. We don't have time for it. Now, quick. Who's going to go search the dumpster?

SCOTT: Well, I have class.

TINA: We *all* have class. Someone's just going to have to cut.

CAROLYN: I have a test in algebra.

TOM: My parents would kill me.

LIZ: I hate blood.

TINA: There's no blood from suffocating.

LIZ: But how about from cutting him up?

NARR. #1: Bill walks up to the group.

BILL: Who cut up who?

CAROLYN: Mr. Nolan. He killed Perry Paulson and chopped him up with an axe!

TINA: Who said anything about an axe?

CAROLYN: What else would you use to chop up a body?

BILL: I knew the guy was crazy, but I had no idea

TINA: Come on, now. The bell's going to ring. Who's going to the dumpster?

SCOTT: Well, I think you should.

TINA: Why me?

SCOTT: Because . . . because you're an office aide. No one will question why you're out of class.

TINA: Office aides don't work at the dumpster.

SCOTT: Well, they could. I think you're it, Tina. See you later.

NARR. #2: All the students hurry off, except for Tom and Tina.

TOM: I'll go with you, Tina. I can't let you do this alone.

NARR. #1: Tina and Tom go out to the dumpster behind the school. Tom hoists Tina over the top and she climbs inside. In a few minutes, all the students except Liz and Scott show up.

BILL: We decided to come help.

TONY: We couldn't let you do this alone.

SHELLY: Solving a murder is more important than taking an algebra test.

CAROLYN: (*Muttering*) I hope you'll explain that to my mother.

NARR. #2: Tina begins throwing garbage bags over the side of the dumpster. The students apprehensively open them and begin poking tentatively inside, spilling trash all over the sidewalk.

NARR. #1: As they work, Mr. Nolan quietly walks up behind them. He watches for a minute, frowning.

MR. NOLAN: What, may I ask, is going on here?

NARR. #2: The students jump. They are horrified to see Mr. Nolan.

TOM: Oh, no. I'm too young to die.

TONY: We won't tell a soul, Mr. Nolan. Honest.

SHELLY: We won't breathe a word.

BILL: What's one less seventh grader, anyway? We don't miss him.

CAROLYN: And he *was* awfully aggravating.

TINA: Please, sir. Spare us.

MR.
NOLAN: Spare you? After you've cut classes and dumped trash all over the place? There's not a chance I'll spare you.

CAROLYN: Then . . . then could you please use something besides the axe? I hate pain. And blood.

MR.
NOLAN: Axe? What in the world has gotten into you people? I'm going to get to the bottom of this one way or another. Come on, all of you. Inside.

NARR. #1: The students follow, looking sick and frightened.

NARR. #2: Inside the school, they see Liz, who is standing at her locker. Scott has just walked away from her.

NARR. #1: As Scott passes, Tom whispers to him.

TOM: Call the police. He's going to kill us. Hurry.

NARR. #1: The group continues toward the office, and Liz opens her locker.

PERRY: Boo!

NARR. #2: She lets out a bloodcurdling scream as Perry Paulson jumps out at her.

NARR. #1: Liz runs away, toward the group heading for the office.

NARR. #2: Perry stands beside the locker, laughing.

PERRY: It was worth it. What's five more minutes of claustrophobia when I can get a reaction like that?

SHELLY: He's alive!

TONY: Or he's a ghost!

CAROLYN: Or Mr. Nolan really killed someone else.

TINA: Or maybe he's killed lots of people.

TOM: We're done for.

TINA: Not me. I'm not going to go along with this. (*She shouts.*) Help! Help!

NARR. #1: The students begin running away, in different directions.

NARR. #2: Up and down the hallway, teachers hear the commotion and come out of their classrooms.

NARR. #1: Students crowd at the doors to see what is going on.

NARR. #2: Soon a siren sounds in the distance.

NARR. #1: Mr. Nolan stands bewildered, shaking his head.

MR.

NOLAN: I don't think I'll ever understand teenagers.

NARR. #2: Later, the students are in the assistant principal's office, along with a police officer. Tina has just finished telling her story to the group.

PERRY: Interesting. I thought I was absent this morning for an orthodontist appointment. Now I hear I was absent because I'm dead. You'd think I'd be the first to know.

MR.

NOLAN: You're not the one dead.

TINA: Then it's someone else?

MR.

NOLAN: Yes. I confess. It's Maynard.

POLICE

OFFICER: Maynard who?

MR.

NOLAN: Maynard . . . Nolan, I guess.

TINA: Your son? You killed your own son?

MR.

NOLAN: No, Tina. Maynard is my son and daughter's gerbil. My wife and kids are visiting her mother, and I said I'd bring Maynard to the science lab while they are gone.

BILL: You mean you wouldn't even feed your own kids' gerbil for them?

MR.

NOLAN: Of course I'd feed him. But, well, Joey didn't think I would give him enough attention. He wanted me to bring him to the lab where he'd be with other animals.

CAROLYN: And that's where you strangled him?

MR.
NOLAN: No, that's when the fire alarm went off — when I was opening the cage to pet him. (*Sheepishly*) Melissa made me promise I'd pet him.

SHELLY: So you accidentally petted him too hard and squashed him?

MR.
NOLAN: I didn't squash him. But I did hurry to the office to see about the fire alarm, and I accidentally left the cage open.

TONY: And he got out?

MR.
NOLAN: Yes. And, unfortunately

SCOTT: I know! The boa constrictor got him.

MR.
NOLAN: No. The refrigerator got him. He climbed into the science lab refrigerator somehow. And by the time anyone noticed, he had suffocated.

LIZ: So it was the gerbil you put in the garbage bag — not Perry?

MR.
NOLAN: Of course it wasn't Perry.

PERRY: That's a relief.

TINA: And you weren't going to tell your son and daughter Maynard had died?

MR.
NOLAN: Well . . . only if I had to. I was hoping I'd be able to find another gerbil that looked just like him. You see, Joey and Melissa really loved that gerbil.

PERRY: Just like Liz loves Gilbert Flescher.

LIZ: Perry! You know, I think it's too bad you *weren't* strangled. And maybe I should correct that mistake right now

NARR. #1: Liz steps toward him threateningly.

PERRY: Let me remind you, Liz, that there *is* an officer of the law present.

POLICE
OFFICER: No one down at the station is going to believe this one. No one at all.

MR. NOLAN: (*Grumbling*) I don't believe it myself. Listen, maybe we could just forget all the unpleasantness and band together for a noble purpose.

LIZ: What noble purpose is that?

MR. NOLAN: We could all start looking around for a new, cute little brown gerbil, about this size

TINA: And teach him to answer to "Maynard?"

MR. NOLAN: Well, it's an idea

CAROLYN: Mr. Nolan, I think you're going to have to tell your children the truth.

PERRY: After all, you're supposed to be setting a good example for us. And how would it look if you had all of us impressionable young people helping you deceive your children?

MR. NOLAN: (*Scowling at Perry*) You know, I think Liz had a point a minute ago. It *is* too bad no one strangled this kid. (*He sighs.*) Don't worry. I know I've got to tell them the truth; I promise.

POLICE OFFICER: Speaking of truth, I hope you've all learned something here today.

CAROLYN: Yes, don't spread rumors.

SCOTT: Be sure you have the facts before you repeat information.

TINA: Don't listen to gossip.

TONY: Never leave a gerbil cage unlocked.

LIZ: Never, ever live next door to Perry Paulson if you can help it.

PERRY: (*To the police officer*) She'd rather live next door to Gilbert Flescher — you know, so they could be closer.

LIZ: Officer, is assault *always* against the law?

POLICE OFFICER: I'm afraid so. (*He smiles.*) Yes, I'm afraid so.

For Discussion

1. What led to the belief that Mr. Nolan had chopped Perry up with an axe and left him in a dumpster? Trace the steps that led to the misunderstanding.
2. At what different points in the misunderstanding could things have been cleared up? How? What could different individuals have said or done?
3. Tina truly believed the rumor she started. Did that make the rumor any less harmful? How can a person guard against spreading rumors unintentionally?
4. Can you think of some real-life situations where confusion, misunderstanding, or rumor led to a very wrong conclusion?

A number of years ago, for example, a junior high teacher had a cat named *Ballou*. He also had a student who was quite a behavior problem and whose last name was *Belew*. One day the teacher was talking to a friend who had moved away. The friend, who had often heard the teacher complain about his student, said, "How's *Belew* doing?"

"He died last month," said the teacher.

"Oh no!" said the friend. "How did he die?"

"Brain tumor. I was actually kind of relieved, in a way. He had been behaving so strangely."

"Relieved? I mean, I know Belew was difficult, but isn't that a bit harsh?"

"No, he really was sick. At the end, he jumped into the bathtub with me and started walking on my stomach."

At that point, the friend was quite convinced the teacher had lost his mind. It took awhile for them to unravel the confusion and see that the teacher was, of course, talking about the cat, while the friend was talking about the student.

The Truth vs. the Whole Truth

Is something true just because someone says it is? Of course not. However, sometimes even a true statement can be very misleading.

Let's suppose that Mary says, "My parents won't give me any lunch money, even though they are wealthy." That statement makes the parents sound rather heartless and cruel. Mary may be telling the truth, but perhaps she has left out some information — that she spent her lunch money on video games and her parents won't give her any more. They want her to learn to live within a budget. This added information changes our impression of the parents.

For each statement below, see if you can imagine information that might have been left out, information that would change the impression each statement leaves.

1. My teacher kept me after school just because I said, "Yes, ma'am."
2. April gave her brother Joe a black eye.
3. My mother grounded me for a month, just for forgetting to vacuum the living room.
4. My son didn't come home until 3:30 last night, after I had to pick him up at the police station.
5. My parents won't let me go to church anymore.
6. We didn't do our homework because the substitute teacher told us not to.
7. The teacher told my daughter she couldn't write her paper on gorillas, but she let another girl in the class write on that subject.
8. If students give the principal money, he will let them out of detention.

A statement can be true yet leave a false impression. Sometimes there is a difference between the truth and the *whole* truth. Have you ever deliberately told only part of the truth to someone — perhaps to your parents or to a teacher? Have you ever been misled because you heard only part of the truth? How can people guard against being misled by statements that leave out important information?

You Can Prove Anything If You Want

In a small town many years ago, an old man was murdered. The leading suspect was a high school senior in the town. As soon as the boy was brought in for questioning, people began talking. Nearly everyone was convinced that the boy had done it. Why? There was a great deal of evidence.

First of all, those on his bowling team remembered that the boy was absent the night of the murder, and he had never been absent before. Teachers remembered that the boy had often been in trouble at school. A number of people had seen the boy in the neighborhood on the afternoon of the killing. And, finally, the boy had no alibi for the evening.

According to rumor, the boy was guilty. But was he really? No. Eventually the police discovered the murder had been committed by a man who had escaped from a mental institution. What about all the "evidence" that the boy was guilty?

As it turned out, he had stayed home from bowling because he had the flu. He had been seen in the neighborhood the afternoon of the killing because his girlfriend lived near there. Yes, he often got into trouble at school, but so did a lot of other students. That didn't mean he had murdered someone. And he couldn't prove where he was the evening of the murder because his parents had been out of town.

Unfortunately, it is often easy to "prove" things that aren't true. If you look for evidence for what you want to see, you will probably be able to find it. You may, however, have to ignore a lot of evidence to the contrary.

Try the following experiment. Find all the evidence you can to "prove" one of the false statements listed below. List your "evidence" in complete sentences.

1. Your teacher robbed a local bank last week.
2. Your teacher hates girls.
3. Your teacher hates boys.
4. Your school is about to be closed because the structure is likely to explode.
5. There was a poisoning at lunch last week. Police are investigating one of the cooks.
6. Someone is buried behind the school.
7. There are three aliens from outer space attending this school.
8. This class is the brightest group of students your teacher has ever taught.
9. Brown is the most popular color in your school.
10. Your principal is really a movie star in disguise.

It *is* possible to "prove" statements that are actually false. How can you apply this knowledge to the real world? Think about television, newspapers, books, speeches, conversations, etc. Why is it important for people to read and listen critically?

